

Civil Resistance Against Authoritarian and Religious Radicalism



# Sufi Waqf as Non-Violent Structure of Resistance and Peacebuilding: The Case of Sufi Communities in Algeria



Prof. Mustapha RADJI

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#### **About the Author**

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Mustapha Radji

This paper explores the role of Sufi waqfs as enduring structures of civic resistance and peacebuilding in Muslim societies, with a special focus on the Alawiyya Sufi order in Algeria. Using Acemoglu and Robinson's framework of the "Narrow Corridor," it argues that waqfs have historically provided a buffer that enables Muslim communities to resist both authoritarian states and extremist movements, while sustaining a balance between authority and social autonomy.

The study traces the civic functions of Sufi waqfs across three historical phases. In the premodern period, zawiyas used endowed resources to secure independence from rulers, providing education, justice, and mediation. During the colonial era, Sufi communities preserved cultural identity and autonomy through economic self-sufficiency, often employing non-violent strategies of resistance. In the post-independence period, authoritarian regimes confiscated waqf assets, weakening their autonomy, yet Sufi communities continued to preserve traditions and promote peace. The case of the Alawiyya Zawiyya highlights this resilience: despite repression during the socialist period, the order reemerged under Sheikh Khaled Bentounes, contributing to intercultural dialogue and promoting the International Day of Living Together in Peace, recognized by the United Nations in 2017.

The paper concludes that Sufi waqfs remain vital indigenous resources for non-violent resistance, pluralism, and civic engagement. Strengthening their legal framework—particularly through modern foundation laws—would enhance their ability to serve as credible partners in efforts to counter authoritarianism and religious radicalism in Algeria and beyond.

#### 1. Introduction

Religion continues to play an important role in shaping public life. As José Casanova (2001) showed, faith traditions are not confined to private belief; they have the power to mobilize communities, create social capital, and encourage participation. In Muslim societies, many scholars argue that Islam can contribute in the same way, offering values of solidarity, justice, and tolerance that are essential for a healthy civil society (Hefner 2000; Sarkissian 2012). Sufi orders, in particular, have long embodied this civic spirit. (Bruinessen and Howell 2007)



Ahmad al-Alawi (c. 1920)

Historically, Sufi communities filled gaps left by weak or absent states. They provided welfare, mediated conflicts, educated young people, and promoted values of coexistence (Bruinessen and Howell 2007; Weiss 2002). Rooted in spirituality, their lodges (zawiyas) became spaces where religious devotion was linked to social responsibility. Sufi leaders often opposed injustice, resisted colonial domination, and offered non-violent responses to authoritarian rulers. Even in the late twentieth century, they stood against extremism by teaching the values of peace, love, and reconciliation (Bushra 2018; Farah and Shahzad 2024).

Despite this long tradition, Sufi communities in North Africa remain underresearched. In Algeria, their role has often been constrained by authoritarian policies, confiscation of their assets, and restrictive legal frameworks (Piraino 2023; Morgan 2001). This paper addresses that gap by focusing on the Alawiyya Sufi Order, founded in 1908 in Mostaganem by Sheikh Ahmad al-'Alawi. The Alawiyya represents a remarkable case of civic resilience. During colonial rule, it contributed to cultural survival; during socialism, it faced repression but maintained community ties; and in recent decades, under Sheikh Khaled Bentounes, it has advanced a global vision of peace. One of its major achievements was the United Nations' adoption of 16 May as the International Day of Living Together in Peace in 2017, an initiative led by Sheikh Bentounes. To guide the analysis, the paper uses Acemoglu and Robinson's framework of the "Narrow Corridor" (2022). This theory explains how freedom and prosperity can only emerge when state power and social forces remain in balance. If the state dominates, societies face despotism; if society is strong but the state is weak, disorder follows. The Sufi waqf, as this paper argues, provides one way for Muslim societies to remain in this "narrow corridor." By protecting resources from state control and extremist capture, it ensures both autonomy and social responsibility.

This introduction lays the groundwork for the case study of the Alawiyya, which shows how Sufi waqfs function as non-violent structures of resistance and how, with supportive legal reforms, they could play a stronger role in peacebuilding today.

## 2. Revised Theoretical Framework: The Narrow Corridor (Acemoglu and Robinson 2022)

Acemoglu and Robinson (2022) argue in The Narrow Corridor that freedom and prosperity can only be achieved when there is a balance between the power of the state and the strength of society. If the state becomes too strong without any social counterweight, it risks becoming despotic. If society is strong but state institutions are weak, the result is disorder and anarchy. The "narrow corridor" describes the fragile space where both the state and society restrain and empower each other. In this space, inclusive institutions, the rule of law, and long-term development are possible.

#### Balance between State and Society

Within the narrow corridor, society actively monitors the state, contests its excesses, and sometimes cooperates with it. Citizens do not passively accept authority; instead, they participate, resist when necessary, and build partnerships when possible. Acemoglu and Robinson (2020) explain that this is what occurred in much of the West after the Second World War: states grew stronger, but societies also mobilized to check and balance power, creating a path of shared growth.

#### Complementarity of State and Society

The theory also emphasizes that liberty requires both a capable state and a mobilized society. The state is necessary to enforce laws, provide public goods, and maintain order. But without a strong civil society, the state easily slips into authoritarianism. Conversely, without functioning state institutions, even strong social movements may lead to fragmentation rather than freedom.

#### Application to Sufi Waqfs

In this study, the Sufi waqf is understood as a civic institution that helps Muslim societies remain inside this "narrow corridor." By protecting resources from arbitrary confiscation, wagfs provided spaces of autonomy and solidarity outside state control. At the same time, they promoted education, welfare, and mediation, strengthening society without undermining the state. In this way, Sufi wagfs acted as a buffer against two dangers: authoritarian regimes seeking a monopoly of power, and extremist groups trying to impose coercion from below.

Thus, the Sufi wagf represents an indigenous institutional path that allows Muslim communities to balance authority and freedom, avoiding both despotism and disorder while fostering peace and social resilience.

#### 3. Sufi Waqfs and Their Historical Functions

The waqf (plural: awqaf) is one of the most enduring institutions in Islamic history, deeply rooted in the legal, social, and economic life of Muslim societies. Defined in classical Islamic jurisprudence as the permanent dedication of property or assets for charitable or religious purposes, the waqf is characterized by the inalienability of its assets and the perpetual use of its benefits for designated causes. Jurists across both Sunni and Shia schools created detailed rules to regulate waqfs, ensuring that they were protected from arbitrary confiscation (Kuran 2001).

#### Public, Family, and Sufi Waqfs

Historically, two main types of waqfs developed. Public waqfs supported communal goods such as mosques, schools (madrasas), hospitals (bimaristans), libraries, fountains, and caravanserais. Family waqfs ensured the well-being of descendants, often protecting wealth from rigid inheritance laws. Both forms shared a key feature: relative independence from direct state control. This autonomy often made waqfs vehicles for shielding local resources against political appropriation (Çizakça 2000; Kuran 2001).

The Sufi waqf emerged as a distinctive hybrid form, combining family and public purposes. Private donations or family-owned properties were dedicated to maintaining zawiyas (Sufi lodges), supporting disciples, financing ritual and educational activities, and providing services for broader communities. This dual nature anchored Sufi orders in family contributions while orienting them toward collective welfare.

#### Liberal Legal Functions of Waqf

The waqf offered unusual legal flexibility. Unlike inheritance rules that restricted how property could be divided, waqfs allowed founders to decide freely how their wealth would be used, including across generations. Women could also establish waqfs, giving them an important degree of economic empowerment (Powers 2002). This "liberal" character of waqfs allowed them to protect vulnerable groups, bypass restrictive inheritance systems, and strengthen social solidarity (Çizakça 2000).

Economically, waqfs shielded wealth from confiscation by rulers, creating a layer of security for individuals and communities (Kuran 2001). Socially, their role was wide-ranging: they were used to free slaves and prisoners (Hoexter, Eisenstadt, and Levtzion 2002); to integrate outsiders into local networks; and to support refugees, such as Muslims and Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 (Baer 1997). Waqfs also had international roles, providing aid to pilgrims during the Hajj. In the Ottoman period, some waqfs functioned as spaces of mediation and refuge, offering justice outside state courts (Isin 2011). These functions made waqfs central props of social stability from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.

#### Sufi Waqfs as Non-Violent Resistance

For Sufi orders, waqfs became the backbone of their independence. By relying on endowed properties, Sufi communities built lodges and organized social services without depending on rulers who often controlled public waqfs. This autonomy enabled them to offer security, education, conflict mediation, and even crisis relief in times when state institutions were absent or oppressive. In this way, the Sufi waqf created an alternative civic space insulated from authoritarian control.

#### Core Functions of Sufi Waqfs

• **Social and economic welfare** – supporting education, health services, and aid to the poor, thereby reducing dependence on state provision (Weiss 2002).

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- Cultural and spiritual autonomy sustaining zawiyas as spaces of worship. mediation, and tolerance across ethnic and sectarian lines, as seen in the Tijaniyya order (Abun-Nasr 1965; Triaud 1995).
- Political autonomy creating independent spaces away from rulers and building parallel communities. In South Asia, Sufi networks paralleled the rise of the Delhi Sultanate (Farah and Shahzad 2024). In Africa, the Sanusi order (Evans-Pritchard 1949) and the Muridiyya in Senegal (O'Brien 1971; Ndiaye 2025; Villalón 1995) illustrate how Sufi wagfs became bases for community self-organization and resistance.

#### 4. Sufi Waqfs as Instruments of Peaceful Resistance

Sufi waqfs were not only economic mechanisms but also the backbone of Sufi autonomy. Across three phases — premodern, colonial, and post-independence they enabled Sufi orders to resist authoritarianism through non-violent means, and later to stand against both socialist repression and extremist violence.

#### 4.1 Premodern Period: Resisting Authoritarian Rulers

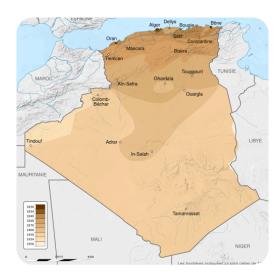
Supported by waqf endowments, zawiyas secured independence from rulers who sought control through taxation and coercion. Protected by Islamic law, endowed land could not be seized by the state, allowing zawiyas to build schools, provide justice, and offer social welfare where the state was absent. Their legitimacy among rural populations came not from coercion but from trust. When rulers abused their power, Sufi leaders mediated disputes or denounced unjust actions, using moral authority to protect communities (Trimingham 1971; Lapidus 2014; Cornell 1998).



Zawiya of Sidi Qasim al-Jalizi in Tunis: view of the courtyard leading to the mausoleum chamber

#### 4.2 Colonial Period: Peaceful Defiance of Empire

During colonial rule, many Sufi orders became centers of cultural survival. While leaders, like Emir 'Abd al-Qadir in Algeria, first engaged in military resistance before shifting to reconciliation, others, such as the Muridiyya in Senegal under Amadu Bamb, built a purely non-violent strategy. Through farming Bamba disciplined labor. created autonomous economy and a moral community independent of French control (O'Brien 1971; Villalón 1995). Similarly, the Sanusiyya in Libya with combined spiritual authority social organization, embodying a parallel civic system outside colonial power (Evans-Pritchard 1949). Wagfs gave these movements economic autonomy, sustaining education, welfare, and identity without confrontation.



Chronological map of French Algeria's evolution

### 4.3 Post-Independence Period: Responding to Socialist States

After independence, many governments confiscated waqf assets to impose socialist reforms, undermining the financial autonomy of zawiyas. In Algeria, Ben Bella and Boumediene nationalized Sufi lands; in Tunisia, Bourguiba abolished waqfs entirely. This weakened Sufi institutions and fueled accusations that they were "backward." Yet most responded peacefully: the Rahmaniyya in Kabylia relied on family networks, while the Alawiyya, despite harassment, survived through the leadership of Sheikh Khaled Bentounes, who later carried its message abroad (Piraino 2023).

#### 4.4 Facing Islamist Extremism in the 1990s

With the rise of Islamist radicalism and civil war in Algeria, the state turned to Sufi zawiyas as allies against extremism. Their teachings of tolerance, peace, and reconciliation offered a counter-narrative to jihadist violence. Despite decades of repression, their moral authority and grassroots presence made them credible partners in restoring social cohesion.

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#### 4.5 Continuities and Lessons

Across these phases, one theme stands out: Sufi orders consistently used waqfs to maintain independence and resist authoritarian or extremist power without resorting to violence. Even when their assets were eroded, their moral and cultural authority endured. The policy lesson is clear: empowering such civic institutions strengthens resilience against both authoritarian domination and extremist ideologies.

#### 5. The Case of the Zawiya Alawiyya in Algeria: Heritage of Peaceful Resistance

The waqf, as a charitable endowment outside state control, allowed Sufi communities to combine private property with public benefit. While Islamic inheritance law often restricted options for wealth distribution, wagf law gave founders greater freedom. In North Africa, though Maliki law predominated, most Sufi zawiyas relied on Hanafi courts to establish their family waqfs. The Hanafi framework provided greater sustainability and flexibility, while Maliki law emphasized egalitarianism and the inclusion of women. This legal choice zawiyas long-term stability gave and autonomy.



Chronological map of French Algeria's evolution

A striking example is the Zawiya Alawiyya, founded in 1908 by Sheikh Ahmad al-'Alawi (1869–1934) in Mostaganem, Algeria. Registered under Hanafi law during French colonial rule, the waqf secured financial independence. Sheikh al-'Alawi promoted Sufism as a modern, civic religion compatible with French colonial modernity, publishing journals and newspapers to defend his community against Wahhabi criticism (Berque 1936; Lings 1961; Khatir 2019; Chabry 2022). His influence extended beyond Algeria, inspiring European intellectuals who embraced Sufism.

During the War of National Liberation (1954–1962), the Alawiyya played an important humanitarian role, offering relief and solidarity despite colonial violence (Khatir 2019). After independence, however, the socialist governments of Ben Bella and Boumediene confiscated waqf properties and restricted Sufi activities. In these years of repression, the Alawiyya resisted peacefully, maintaining spiritual practices in homes and zawiyas to preserve solidarity and identity.

In the 1990s, Algeria entered a new crisis: democratization opened the way for Islamist populism, which quickly turned to extremism and civil war. At this point, the state turned to Sufi zawiyas, including the Alawiyya, as allies against terrorism. Their discourse of peace, reconciliation, and moderation offered a credible counter-narrative to radical Islamism (Piraino 2023).

Under Sheikh Khaled Bentounes, the Alawiyya experienced a revival. He expanded the order's civic engagement internationally through the creation of the AISA International NGO. This organization promotes intercultural dialogue, gender equality, environmental protection, and a culture of peace. Its most visible success was the adoption by the United Nations in 2017 of 16 May as the International Day of Living Together in Peace (Resolution A/RES/72/130), an initiative inspired by Bentounes and the Alawiyya.

#### 6. Policy Lessons

The Alawiyya case shows how Sufi waqfs sustain civic resilience across changing regimes:

- Legal strategies matter choosing flexible Hanafi waqf law ensured longterm autonomy in a Maliki environment.
- **Spiritual authority enables civic action** even when stripped of resources, zawiyas preserved identity through teaching and mediation.
- Partnership with the state when faced with extremism, zawiyas offered the state a credible grassroots partner.
- Global potential Sufi actors can translate local traditions into universal peace initiatives, as seen in the UN recognition of the Day of Living Together in Peace.

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#### 7. Political Recommendations for Strengthening Sufi Civil Society in Algeria

To reinforce the role of Sufi associations in peacebuilding and civic engagement, Algeria needs to provide them with an enabling legal framework. Current laws on associations restrict their ability to mobilize resources, build partnerships, and expand their activities.

A practical step would be to adopt a modern foundation law, similar to those in Europe or North America, which would give non-profit cultural and religious organizations greater transparency, flexibility, and sustainability. Such a Law would allow Sufi associations to:

- Establish and manage endowments.
- Attract international partnerships and funding.
- Professionalize their civic and educational initiatives.

This would not only empower civil society but also strengthen Algeria's cultural resistance to extremism and authoritarianism, while enhancing its contribution to global peacebuilding.

#### Good News: The 2025 Waqf Law

The adoption of a new waqf law in March 2025 is a positive step. For the first time, Algerian law recognizes the right to establish waqf foundations. However, the law remains largely declarative. It lacks practical provisions on how foundations can be created, managed, and integrated into civic life.



The Ministry of Religious Affairs, in the vicinity of the Islamic Institute (Algiers)

For this reform to succeed, Algeria should:

- Issue clear regulatory texts to operationalize the law.
- Ensure transparent governance of waqf foundations.
- Allow Sufi associations to use foundations as sustainable financing tools.

If effectively implemented, the 2025 waqf law could provide Sufi communities with the resources and autonomy needed to serve as credible partners in promoting peace, reconciliation, and civic resilience.

#### Conclusion

The experience of the Alawiyya Sufi community in Algeria shows that Sufi waqfs are more than religious or charitable institutions. They have long been foundations of civic life, helping communities resist authoritarian rulers, preserve cultural identity under colonial domination, and respond peacefully to the challenges of post-independence repression and extremist violence. Across these different contexts, the Sufi model of non-violent resistance has remained consistent: relying on endowed resources to maintain autonomy, teaching values of peace and tolerance, and offering communities a moral alternative to both state authoritarianism and radical exclusivism.

Today, the Alawiyya order continues to demonstrate how Sufism can contribute to peacebuilding. Under the leadership of Sheikh Khaled Bentounes, it has taken its message beyond Algeria through civic initiatives and intercultural dialogue. The recognition by the United Nations of 16 May as the International Day of Living Together in Peace illustrates how a local religious tradition can inspire a global culture of reconciliation and coexistence.



The United Nations
Office at Geneva
(Switzerland) is the
second largest UN
office, after the
United Nations
Headquarters in New
York City.

Yet, challenges remain. Restrictive laws on associations and the absence of a modern foundation law in Algeria still limit the ability of Sufi communities to mobilize resources and build sustainable civic institutions. The adoption of a new waqf law in 2025 is a step forward, but without clear mechanisms for implementation, its impact will be limited.

The main recommendation of this paper is therefore clear: by providing Sufi associations with an enabling legal framework, the state can empower them to play a stronger role in promoting civic engagement, countering extremism, and advancing peace. Strengthening these institutions is not only vital for Algeria but also for global efforts to resist authoritarianism and radicalism.

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